

Belcanto in Wildbad, July 2003

This was the fifteenth Festival in Bad Wildbad, where Rossini went for a cure in 1856, not unconnected with having abused Venus and Bacchus from an early age, according to Stendhal. This year could surely have been called the Belcanto Opera Festival rather than Rossini in Wildbad, which remained as the main heading on the posters throughout the charming little Black Forest town.

And Belcanto it was: not just Rossini's Torvaldo e Dorliska in a brilliant production by Francesco de Carpentries of the Theatre de la Monnaie, at last freed to do his own thing instead of assisting Peter Stein, Herbert Wernicke and Peter Sellars in Brussels. Michele Bianchini's Duca d'Ordow was up to the vocal standard of Stefano Antonucci in Lugano but had a more imposing and wicked presence, beautifully supported by Paola Cigna as Dorliska, with Huw Rhys-Evans as an effective if slightly wet Torvaldo, thus allowing the Duke to exert his terrifying fascination over the heroine - and all this amidst the most glorious Rossini music, well played by the Czech Chamber soloists from Brno and tightly directed by Alessandro de Marchi, who also accompanied on the harpsichord.

The second last evening of the Festival brought us the German premiere of L'Italiana in Algeri, not by Rossini but in Luigi Mosca's 1808 version of Angelo Anelli's libretto, which the Pesarese used five years later. Brad Cohen, the young Australian who is now a regular at Wildbad and Holland Park, directed a lively production with an international cast from Poland, Hungary, Iceland, Chile and Germany. Although one could see and hear why Rossini's version rather than Mosca's survived, it was fascinating to compare the two and recognise Mosca's forgotten qualities.

Even more credit was due to Jochen Schönleber, the energetic director of the Festival, for the Mayr opera, also a premiere in modern times. L'Accademia di Musica had its original premiere in the Venice San Samuele Theatre during the autumn of 1799 and was a delight, particularly the second half (it was originally a one-acter), when the characters hold a singing competition with wonderful parodies of contemporary hits. The plot is basic Commedia dell'Arte stuff, with clever servants helping the son to the girl he loves against an ageing father, but done in Wildbad with great verve by a cast which was mostly Italian (Roberto Abbondanza as the father Guglielmo, Roberta Canzian as the Venetian girlfriend Annetta, and Gioacchino Zarrelli, sadly on his last opera appearance, as the servant Cecchino) but very well supported by the German Florian Mock as the son, the Georgian Maja Tabatadze as the servant Vespina and the Hungarian Donat Havar as Annetta's brother.

Three of the singers from Torvaldo e Dorliska gave a delightful

concert of Rossini arias on the last afternoon, after which Reto Müller of the Deutsche Rossini Gesellschaft and the Donizettian expert Anders Wiklund (who had found and re-worked the score) explained the background to the Mayr opera; then on the last morning we had the final concert with the young singers from the summer school, who this year were instructed by Raul Gimenez.

All this in three days, coupled with splendid weather, Black Forest walks and thermal baths! It would be hard to imagine a more pleasant and stimulating festival.

Sam Eadie



Marino Faliero comes home

For those of us unable to see the Parma production of *Marino Faliero* sixteen months ago, who had not made it to Bergamo in 1966 and who have had to be content until now with the recording of the Szeged concert performance in 1999; the revival of Daniele Abbado's Parma version in Venice was irresistible.

We were not disappointed: Venice was at its most glorious and the evening triumphantly surpassed our expectations. The production was entirely as one could imagine Donizetti would have wanted it; the scenery, though quite austere, conjured-up the watery city and enhanced the drama most effectively, the costumes splendidly brought out the contrast between the patricians and the plebeians, while the acting was moving in its eloquence. An unbelievable plus was the libretto in surtitles above the stage, exactly timed with the protagonists so that all could be understood and followed. And what a cast! Michele Pertusi as the Doge; Mariella Devia as his wife Elena; Rocky Blake as the young lover Fernando; Simone Alberghini suitably villainous as Steno and perhaps best of all, Roberto Servile as Israele Bertucci. All were in excellent form and Bruno Campanella directed both cast and very good orchestra with dedication and precision.

Coming out of the Teatro Malibran into a warm night by the Rialto, our overwhelming feeling was that justice had been done to this marvellous Donizetti opera after almost total neglect for over a hundred years. If only more theatres could follow Abbado's example!

Sam Eadie

(On the following page: Federico Ricci (as *Oloferne*) at the mercy of Madame Rossini (*Giuditta*), a painting c 1831 by Horace Vernet who had taken the Neapolitan maestro under his wing and who was director of the French Academy in Rome at the Villa Medici. In later life Olympe Pélissier elected to delete this period of her life so that visits by the younger composer to Rossini in Paris during the latter's Gallic apogee tended to be brief and decidedly chilly.)